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ONTARIO

ONTARIO CONSUMER AND COMMERCIAL RELATIONS

Ministry Accomplishments 1997

1997 -- a year of challenges, change and achievements at the Ministry of Consumer and Commercial Relations

The year 1997 will be remembered for the Ministry of Consumer and Commercial Relation's (MCCR) strong support of government's initiatives on the economic front,expanding its partnerships with the private sector, improving efficiency and service and continuing its essential role in consumer protection and education.

The ministry's vision is to promote a fair, safe and informed marketplace which supports a competitive economy in Ontario.

Its mission is to provide services that meet the needs of the evolving marketplace and support business growth and investment, to expand consumer information and education, to respond to the public's need for better, more affordable service and to enhance current standards for public safety, business practices and consumer protection.

The ministry's 1997 Business Plan focused on four key strategies:

- establishing partnerships with industry in regulatory and business activities.
- seeking opportunities for private-sector delivery of services.
- using technology to enhance service to business and consumers.
- streamlining operations.

Accomplishments in 1997 included:

Ontario Business Connects expands

The Ontario Business Connects network, allowing entrepreneurs starting or expanding their businesses to instantly register or renew their business name, now has more than 80 computer workstations across the province. There will be more than 100 workstations by April, 1999.

Five of the most commonly required applications for start-up or expansion can be completed and application made for a federal Business Number. As a result, the six-week business name registration process is reduced to 20 minutes.

Ontario Business Connects is now handling nearly 60 per cent of all transactions, representing about 60,000 business name registrations a year.

MCCR is also the lead for the government-wide Service Delivery Strategy, which reshapes the relationship between business and government through partnerships with the private sector. A "toolkit" issued in 1997 offers advice on a wide range of topics, from business and financial planning to market research and labor relations.

Improved access to MCCR services; volumes up substantially

The ministry continued to expand its electronic capabilities to improve access to

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ministry services, including searching and registering real property and personal property and searching corporate public records.

At the same time, the ministry handled double-digit increases in business searches, incorporations, small business registrations, real property and personal property registrations.

At the Office of the Register General, where requests for certificates and searches were also up, a customer service improvement project achieved remarkable results: the number of phone calls getting a busy signal decreased to fewer than 20 aday from 9,000 a day and the average waiting time was reduced from almost five minutes to about two minutes. Requests received by mail moved 30 per cent faster and over-the-counter requests were completed 20 per cent faster.

MCCR's World Wide Web site getting busier

Also getting busier was the ministry's Internet website. Set up in October, 1996, it included a ministry website and Ontario Business Connects website. The Ontario Business Connects website was expanded in 1997 and MCCR is about to introduce a brand new website in early 1998. The site averaged 2,000 visitors a day with a record 3,154 visits on December 20. The address is:www.ccr.gov.on.ca

MCCR identifies red tape reduction targets

The Government Processing Simplification Act (Ministry of Consumer and Commercial Relations) (Bill 64) reduced burdens on business and maintained protection for consumers in areas regulated by the Motor Vehicle Repair Act, the Motor Vehicle Dealers Act and the Consumer Protection Act.

MCCR also identified more than 100 other red tape reduction opportunities in the Red Tape Reduction Act (Ministry of Consumer and Commercial Relations) 1997 (Bill 117). The ministry hopes to introduce a bill incorporating these changes in 1998. Highlights included:

- changes to the Corporations Act to reduce red tape and compliance costs for some not-for-profit corporations, encouraging them in their efforts to build stronger communities.
- reform of the Liquor Licence Act to remove barriers to job creation in the hospitality industry without promoting over-consumption.
- amendments to the Loan Brokers Act to increase the public's protection against unscrupulous loan brokers.
- changes to the Theatres Act to reduce the costs and time of film classification and approval while preserving community standards.

LCBO modernization initiatives launched

The ministry launched initiatives to modernize the LCBO, including the opening of some LCBO stores on Sundays, a bottle-your-own-wine pilot project and operational and administrative changes resulting in greater efficiency.

The LCBO also introduced two major initiatives in support of its social responsibility program: a BYID (Bring Your Identification) photo identification card to help screen out under-age customers and Check 25, a year-round program requiring identification and proof of age from anyone appearing younger than 25.

Beverage alcohol industry initiatives

Several other accomplishments in the beverage alcohol industry were recorded during 1997:

- Ontario wineries were given a new business opportunity when a regulation under the Liquor Control Act was amended to allow the bottling of imported wine. It will help improve wineries' efficiency and competitiveness, help stimulate the economy and create jobs.
- Minister David Tsubouchi joined Premier Mike Harris in Niagara-on-the-Lake when the Premier helped plant one of 75 transgenic grapevines developed in Ontario to produce a stress-resistant "super-grape" that could revolutionize the growing of grapes in Ontario and around the world. The vinifera vine was developed by Chateau des Charmes and researchers at the University of Guelph and the Industrial Research Assistance Program of the National Research Council of Canada.
- Changes were made under the Liquor Licence Act to allow the Liquor Licence Board of Ontario to limit further applications for a liquor sales licence for up to two years at problem premises where on-going infractions have taken place. This offers community groups and local businesses an opportunity to work together to improve their neighborhoods.
- Minister Tsubouchi helped launch a new plan of attack in the fight against the smuggling of alcohol and the sale of illegally-manufactured alcohol. The campaign, sponsored by the Association of Canadian Distillers, offers rewards by Crime Stoppers for information leading to the arrest and conviction of offenders. The campaign is also supported by the Liquor Control Board of Ontario, the Ministry of the Attorney General, Ontario Provincial Police and the Roya! Canadian Mounted Police.
- A committee of MPPs from Ontario's wine producing regions was formed to advise the government caucus on wine industry issues. Committee members are Bart Maves (MPP, Niagara Falls), Tim Hudak (MPP, Niagara South), Tom Froese (MPP, St. Catharines-Brock), Frank Sheehan (MPP, Lincoln) and Jack Carroll (MPP, Chatham Kent).
- Minister Tsubouchi accepted a recommendation of the Red Tape Review Commission that owners of bars, restaurants and hotels be able to use credit cards for liquor purchases at LCBO stores to assist the hospitality industry, consisting mostly of small businesses, and help promote job creation.

Business Plan continues ministry drive

The ministry's 1997-1998 Business Plan focuses on making it easier for business to work with government and efforts to improve the climate for job creation while providing a fair, safe and informed marketplace for consumers.

MCCR continues to restructure and transform its services to meet changing needs in three core business areas -- Marketplace and Public Safety Standards, Commercial Registries and Vital Statistics -- and build on key strategies and initiatives already under way.

The Business Plan reported: "Since 1995-96, the ministry has reduced its direct operating costs by 35 per cent, reduced its staffing by 18 per cent and increased overall productivity by 31 per cent. As these numbers indicate, the ministry has increased the value of its services and posted impressive increases in work volumes. In 1997-98, the ministry will continue its drive for maximum efficiency and cost-effectiveness while maintaining high-quality programs for consumers and industry."

MCCR's 1997 accomplishments clearly demonstrate the ministry has met the tough challenges it set for itself earlier in the year.

Self-funded, self-managed organizations get under way

Three self-funded, self-managed not-for-profit organizations, independent of both industry associations and government, took over the delivery of certain administrative functions. They were the Technical Standards and Safety Authority (TSSA), the Real Estate Council of Ontario (RECO) and the Travel Industry Council of Ontario (TICO). A fourth, the Ontario Motor Vehicle Industry Council (OMVIC), began operations in late 1996.

The new organizations manage daily operations while the ministry retains responsibility for setting standards and legislation and monitors performance to ensure standards, services, consumer protection and public safety are maintained.

The excellent co-operation and dedication of these mature industries has resulted in a smooth, seamless transition for government, business and consumers.

Major initiatives launched by the new organizations have included development of a code of ethics by RECO and a crackdown on curbsiders (automobile venders masquerading as private individuals) by OMVIC.

Electronic access to Companies Branch database offered

A new public-private sector partnership offering electronic access to the Companies Branch database was launched with partners Cyberbahn Inc. and Oncorp Direct Inc., to improve service by transmitting directly to clients such information as corporate reports and certificates.

A second phase will allow corporations to file an electronic Initial Return/Notice of Change and additional electronic services will follow.

The ministry also has a partnership with Teranet Land Information Services Inc. to computerize land registration records. When completed in the year 2000, four million records will have been converted from paper to digital form, making it easier for business to deal with government and government to do better for less cost.

Stepped up inspections, charges laid and education promoted

Consumer protection continued to be a high priority. Inspections in several areas were stepped up, charges were laid under various acts and efforts continued to educate the public on consumer issues. Highlights included:

- the ministry got tough with loan brokers, laying charges under the Loan Brokers Act that resulted in jail sentences, fines, probation and restitution to victims. In one case, the defendant was sentenced to six months imprisonment, fined $22,000, placed on probation for two years and ordered to pay restitution. His company fined $50,000
- a household goods mover from Ajax was sentenced to 17 months in jail when convicted of fraud under the Criminal Code of Canada following an investigation by MCCR and the Anti-rackets Branch of the OPP.
- charges laid against video store owners under the Theatres Act and regulations for distributing adult sex videos not approved for distribution or stickered as adult sex videos.
- the owner of a real estate company was fined $10,000 and his company fined $100,000 when convicted of breach of trust under the Real Estate and Business Brokers Act.

- a home renovation company, its principals and sales people were fined more than $49,000 under the Business Practices Act for unfair practices against senior citizens.
- the casino enforcement unit of the Gaming Control Commission laid charges against several players of cheating at play and conspiracy to cheat. Two cases involved members of alleged international professional cheating teams.
- inspectors from the Gaming Control Commission closed down a Monte Carlo event when they discovered some decks of cards at blackjack tables had been tampered with. In another case, a Monte Carlo operator was charged under the Criminal Code of Canada with fraud and cheating at play. During the year, a total of 111 charges under the Gaming Control Act and 23 charges under the Criminal Code of Canada were laid against operators and employees of Monte Carlo events.
- the largest fine ever imposed for offences under the Gaming Control Act ($10,000) was imposed on a bingo operator for collecting more for a "security fund" from the charities involved and by under-reporting the number of bingo books sold.
- the operator of an amusement ride involved in an accident that injured five passengers, one seriously, was fined $15,000. Charges were also laid against a go-kart track operator and a track patron arising from an accident in which a person died, a ski resort operator following a fatal accident in which a chair-lift derailed and a man conducting fraudulent furnace services and repair work.
- a propane explosion and fire that killed a truck driver, destroyed a trailer home and injured its two owners had a sequel in court when the propane delivery company was fined $40,000 under the ministry's Fuels Safety Program (this program is now administered by the Technical Standards and Safety Authority).
- Minister Tsubouchi warned consumers to carefully review advertising and other literature received from natural gas brokers/marketers of natural gas home heating fuel and stressed the importance of comparison shopping. His message was supported by the distribution of news releases and a Consumer Beat item for newspapers, radio and TV.

Minister joins Hang Up on Fraud phone blitz co-ordinated by MCCR

The ministry co-ordinated the efforts of volunteers, police and corporate representatives in a one-day blitz targeting telephone fraud aimed at senior citizens. Minister Tsubouchi joined 160 volunteers in the campaign called Hang Up on Fraud at the Baycrest Centre for Geriatric Care.

More than 2,600 seniors were cautioned to be wary of telemarketing scams. Scam artists often target seniors, who lost an estimated $3.5 million to telephone fraud in Ontario in 1997. Other participants in the blitz included Cam Jackson, Minister Responsible for Seniors' Issues, and several corporate leaders.

Ontario's lead was followed by Alberta, which conducted a similar campaign.

Expanded same-day service for birth, marriage and death certificates

Customer service received a big boost when MCCR launched same-day counter service for birth, marriage and death certificates in Hamilton, London, North Bay, Ottawa, Sudbury, Whitby and Windsor.

Previously, same day service for birth, marriage and death certificates was available only in Toronto and Thunder Bay. Consumers in these locations are now able to get documentation in one hour compared to eight weeks before the new

service initiative.

Keeping track of dangerous offenders

The Change of Name Act, administered by MCCR, together with the Police Services Act and the Ministry of Correctional Services Act, was amended to prevent criminals from changing their names and leaving their criminal records behind.

Closing this loophole will result in improved law enforcement and investigation capabilities in key areas, such as firearm prohibition orders, driving licence suspensions and restraining orders on spouse abusers, and will enable information to be provided to appropriate agencies.

Call for federal special investigator on gasoline pricing

Minister Tsubouchi called on the federal government to appoint a special investigator to look into gasoline pricing "to ensure Canadian consumers benefit from competitive gasoline pricing" and won agreement at a meeting in Regina of Federal/Provincial/Territorial Ministers of consumer affairs to investigate the pricing policies of Canada's large petroleum companies.

Minister Tsubouchi said he hoped the investigation will ensure fair competition in the gasoline marketplace and Ontario consumers will no longer have to "put up with the roller-coaster pricing practices which seem to occur mainly on long summer weekends."

Also at the conference, the Consumer Ministers agreed to work towards harmonization across Canada of disclosure requirements for the cost of credit.

Advancing government gaming initiative

The ministry advanced the government's charity gaming initiative by:

- proclaiming the Alcohol, Gaming and Charity Funding Public Interest Act (Bill 75) which merged the Gaming Control Commission (GCC) and the Liquor Licence Board of Ontario into a more focused organization to work on gaming and beverage alcohol issues.
- issuing a Request for Proposal (RFP) for the manufacture of break open tickets. In October 1997 two Ontario manufacturers were selected. The RFP put a premium on innovative ticket design, including security features and price and prize structures, and in December, the first new tickets were introduced into the market.
- ensuring the Great Blue Heron Company (Mississauga of Scugog Island First Nation) casino opened on time and with appropriate security and staff approvals. Negotiations with the Mississauga Scugog Island First Nation Lottery Licensing Authority were successful an Enforcement Agreement was entered into respecting enforcement activities related to gaming at the Great Blue Heron.

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